

Imagination in children entering culture

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Introduction

Children enter socio-cultural systems as newcomers and initiators. Relying on the achievements of cultural traditions established by predecessors, human children ‘stand on the shoulder of giants’, scaffolded by accumulated history, know-hows and interactive practices. Although they are born into a world of established practices and social representations, the appropriation and internalisation of culture is not simple reproduction but a task of imaginative construction. Children must both imitate and reconstruct the meanings and cultural codes of the context in which they are born, taking on board what is there and, at the same time, changing and transforming what they find. In this process, they confront culture as a playground in which, at least potentially, they are able to develop and grow into autonomous beings, holders of agency and imagination.

The cultural development of the child offers an empirical opportunity to examine the role of the imagination in the practices whereby human children enter culture. In this chapter, we focus on three such practices – care, play, and storytelling – to observe the imagination at work. Each of these is simultaneously *enabled by* and *enabler of* the imagination. Experiencing caretakers who come and go, playing ‘as if’ an object is something else, telling stories in which far-away places and things become accessible and ‘real’ illustrate

how children come to engage with absence to transform what is the case and invent something else. Moreover, each of these relations – between child and caregiver (in care), between child and peers (in play), and between child and culture (in storytelling) – highlights the microgenetic, ontogenetic and historical dynamic of the imagination in the constitution of a dialogical mind that is social and cultural from the start (Marková, in press, this volume; Valsiner, 2000; Vygotsky, 1929).

Imagining people, situations and worlds that are not there emerges early in childhood and profoundly transforms the relationship between children and the external world (Piaget, 1951). In elaborating the view that the imagination is foundational to mind and representation, we will suggest that its defining feature is the *interplay between presence and absence, which is grounded in the interactions between self and other established by culture*. Central to our chapter is to link the imaginative capacities of the developing mind to the sociocultural dynamic of self-other relations. We aim to show that there is a relation between internalization and the production of culture and between imagination and symbolic thought, which can only be understood in relation to the interdependence between self and other. The paradox of the imagination is that its ‘as if’ logic is able to free the mind from others, situations and world; yet, this logic can only be achieved through reliance and interaction with others, situations and world.

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In developing our argument, we start by revisiting some of the tensions involved in the understanding of the imagination and propose an approach that focuses on the problem of absence. We explore this problem in relation to representation and society and, using our ongoing research on children’s representations of the social world through drawings, we propose a typology of engagement with absence, exploring its different modalities in practices whereby children internalise and construct culture. We review the foundational work of sociocultural psychologists to show that different types of absence in imaginative activity are a function of the psychology of self-relations embedded within cultural practices. Throughout the chapter, we are guided by the question of how different types of engagement with absence, which are central to the imagination, play out in these different practices and how they contribute to the development of mind in culture. This can help us understand that the imagination is both an engine and a consequence of development, central both for the cultural development of the child and for the development of culture.

Revisiting the Imagination

In book VI of the *Republic*, Plato ranks the imagination lowest on his scale of the soul's faculties. For him, its relation to the world is murky; imagining is related to shadows and appearances. The imagination, contrary to reason and understanding, operates in the shadows and is opposed to intelligibility. This view on the imagination has been with us in more or less explicit form ever since (Marková, 2016; Warnock, 1994; see also Jørgensen, this volume). The double separation of reason and imagination and imagination and reality undermined the value of the imagined and shaped much of our understanding of the human mind. It became expressed in both folk and scientific psychology. We refer to the imagination to celebrate the creative and the innovative and at the same time use it to undermine and disqualify a way of thinking.

This tension has permeated the way psychologists approached the imagination and conceived the relation between the inner and the outer worlds. The literature alternatively considers it as a property of cognition, a function of representation, a process of mind, both an engine and consequence of development (Gardner, 1982; Harris, 2000; Leslie, 1987; Pelaprat & Cole, 2011; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Much of traditional psychology carried the assumption that the imagination is egocentric and disengaged from the social, distances the child from objective analysis and is a valve for letting go frustrated desires (Harris, 2000). Linked to this negative view is the frequently asked question of why should the human mind have evolved to invent imaginary friends and dragons, gods, ghosts and far-away non-existent worlds? If adaptation is about precision in cognition, why should modern *homo sapiens* hold ideas that set apart cognition and reality? Framed as an obstacle for objective thinking, the imagination is thus conceived as an impediment in the pathway to reason.

Harris's (2000) comprehensive research on the ontogenesis of children's imagination debunked this negative view to demonstrate that the development of reasoning and objective analysis does not oppose but rather requires the work of the imagination. Drawing on extensive experimental evidence, Harris shows that children use reason in both the imaginative and the analytic orientation and know quite well, from an early age, how to distinguish what is make-believe and what is real. There are multiple parallels in the cognitive functioning of these two orientations – the imaginative and the analytic – and they are both integral to children's reasoning. If anything, the imagination does not oppose but grounds and expands the analysis of

the objective world. Indeed, Harris claims that it is children's capacity to make a clear distinction between the two and switch freely between the real and the make-believe that grounds the suite of skills required for analytical thinking.

This positive view of the imagination has its seeds in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of human development and is present in current socio-cultural approaches to the dialogical mind (see Marková, forthcoming, and Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). For Vygotsky (2004) the imagination is not separated from reality but it is above all in a relationship with reality. He pointed to four basic ways in which the imagination draws from reality and feeds back into reality: 1) the breadth and depth of the self's experience, 2) engagement with the experience of others, 3) emotions and 4) objectification. The experience of self and others, permeated by emotions and extended in objectified artefacts, comprises the building blocks from which the mind recombines and reinvents the reality of the world. Emotions are a central force driving and making up the imagination because the 'non-reality' of an imagined situation can drive and evoke emotional states guiding with feeling the recombining and reinventing of reality (Jovchelovitch, 2015). These are objectified in multiple artefacts, which crystallise the materialisation of the imagined in cultural tools, objects, arts and installations. Its material form completes the circle of creative iterations between imagination and reality. Importantly, Vygotsky grounds the imagination on *experience* and states that it constitutes the first and foremost law of the operations of the imagination. As he wrote:

The creative activity of the imagination depends directly on the richness and variety of a person's previous experience because this experience provides the material from which the products of fantasy are constructed. The richer a person's experience, the richer is the material his imagination has access to. (Vygotsky, 2004, pp. 14-15)

Vygotsky connects both the reach and richness of experience to narrative and communication between self and other, which enable the multiplication and expansion of horizons and the introduction of stimuli that do not pertain to the immediate perceptual experience of the child. By listening to stories through the architecture of intersubjective communication, children start to conceive worlds they do not see and feel in

their immediate perceptual field. In this process, they are guided by the voices and experiences of others, which are embedded in the gestures, play and storytelling of carers, peers, educators and public cultural artefacts. This communicative inter-linking of human experiences in cultural context establishes the interdependence between self and other and simultaneously scaffolds and adapts the child to the challenges of the novel and the unexpected. As Vygotsky argues, if the brain only reproduced what is the case, we would be badly equipped to cope with the challenges and continuous unexpectedness of the environment and its pressing reality. By being able to challenge and transform creatively that reality, Vygotsky and others after him (Harris, 2000) show clearly why the imagination is adaptive. Building castles in the air is, after all, productive for the healthy development of the infant and the adaptation of the species. It is a skill that infants excel at and adults do not give up except under conditions of extreme deprivation (Campbell et al, 2015; Jovchelovitch, 2015), and state terror (see Marková, this volume). Liberating oneself from the immediacy of the perceptual field and being able to creatively recombine elements of context and previous experience is enabled by the interdependence between self-other. Imagination is social, adaptive and intrinsic to rational thinking.

Imagination, Mind, Culture

Our working definition of the imagination is *the human capacity to go beyond the immediate situation and play with possible realities*. At its most basic level, it is a relationship with absence that involves freedom from the here and now. In this sense, the imagination is the foundation of representation and symbolic thinking and a requirement for the realisation of a transcendental sociality (Bloch, 2008). In the imagination, the mind is relating with the not-there guided by an ‘as if’ logic that is cognitive, emotional and social, enabled by the intersubjective architecture that characterises the practices of society and culture.

Sociocultural theories of symbol and social representation, (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Marková, 2003; Wagoner, 2010) show that operations of the symbolic function are intertwined with the imagination. Social representation has been defined by Jodelet (1991) as the process whereby social meanings make the absent present, drawing on symbols for purposes of signification, self-expression and future-making. Researchers in this field have shown that meaning-making is creative and through social imaginaries actively transforms

what is real (Arruda, 2014) fulfilling functions of identity construction (Howarth, 2002; Joffe, 1999; Wagner & Haynes, 2005) and elaboration of alternative representations (Gillespie, 2008). Initial engagements with an absent world that is desired underlie the temporal dimension of representations (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999) and their anticipatory function (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Philogène, 1999; Valsiner, 2003), which enables the construction of projects, utopias and the uniquely human relationship to the future. The imaginative capacity ‘dismisses’ the immediacy and the power of the present situation, introducing characters, experiences and outcomes that are projections of the not-yet, anticipation of a future that is to become (Valsiner, 2003). Not accidentally, in his work on the imagination in adolescence, Vygotsky writes that orientation to the future is the most important feature of the imagination. Indeed, without the imagination there would be no representation of the future, as the very definition of the future is a relationship to the not-yet (Bloch, 1986).

The imagination is also foundational for a distinctively human society and a requirement for the consolidation of culture because it creates a ‘transcendental sociality’ (Bloch, 2008). Transcendental sociality is a form of social life unique to humans, where roles and relationships between people, spheres and objects become objectified beyond immediate transactions. Humans can imagine links and connections; they are able to build images and symbolically re-present the quality, status and position of their interrelations in a continuous chain of social representation. This continuously imagined structure maps out the codes required for guiding behaviour and culturally transmitting human relationships across generations. Being sustained by a modality of thinking independent from the concrete situation, the imagination produces routines and ritualised behaviours that accumulate and survive in institutions and cultural artefacts. Transcendental sociality connects to the objectifying dimension of the imagination and reveals its importance in establishing the objective world. It is another demonstration of the connection between the imagined and the reality of the objective world.

The imagination is therefore a foundational property of the dialogical mind and human societies. It deals with absence and brings it to bear on the reality of the immediately there. It cannot be opposed to truthfulness and accuracy in cognition because the suspension of reference to what is there builds on what is there, is an operation guided by what is there – or by experience in Vygotsky’s terms – and returns to what is there. It cannot be just added to a list of processes of the dialogical mind such as thinking, remembering and

perceiving because it underlies and permeates all of them: it is the foundation of abstraction in rational thinking and the foundation of creativity in fantasy, daydreaming and pretend-play. It enables the transcendental social and the consolidation of culture. As we show in subsequent sections, its ontogenetic history lies at the intersection between inner and outer world and its operations are such that they belong neither to the subjective nor to the objective but to the creativity that comes out of the exchanges between the two (Glăveanu & Gillespie, 2015). In this sense, it is entirely possible to concur with Sartre's (1940/2010) view that the imagination is neither a property nor a function of mind, but its full expression as it realises freedom. However, although Sartre was right to emphasise the imagination as the freedom of mind, sociocultural psychologists demonstrate that what drives this freedom are the relational practices of culture. In this sense, the imagination is bound to the postulate of the primacy of the other in the life of the mind.

Imagination and the developing mind

Our ongoing research on children's constructions of the public sphere (Jovchelovitch, Priego-Hernández & Glăveanu, 2013) offers the ground for exploring the complexity of children's engagement with absence and the manner in which their drawings showcase the work of the imagination. Drawing activity involves the ludic engagement with materials, the search, retrieval and selection of meaning to be communicated, and the cognitive and physical exercise of communicating these meanings through a product, which in turn simultaneously builds on and contributes to the culture children inhabit (Golomb, 2002). When drawing, "the imagination can be used to contemplate real beings and real places, as well as imaginary beings and imaginary places" (Harris, 2012, p. 133).

We analysed drawings of the public sphere produced by 1st and 4th graders in different countries and in different socio-economic milieus within countries. First graders were presented with a task where a puppet (typically a visitor from Mars) asked the children to make a drawing of their public sphere to take back to the puppet's family and friends. The older children in the study - 4th graders - were asked by the researchers to draw their public sphere, operationalised for both ages as community, world, society or country, depending on the country in question (for a full description of methods, coding frame and analysis of the drawings see Jovchelovitch, Priego-Hernández and Glăveanu, 2013). We found that when drawing their social world,

children manipulate absent and present dimensions of their social and psychological experience. The semantic and structural properties of their constructions show variation and complexity in creative engagement with absence. We identify at least three forms of this creative engagement:

- The not-yet-there
- The elsewhere
- The nowhere.

In producing drawings, children engage with cultural elements *not yet there* whose presence is anticipated; with absent yet culturally-grounded and meaningful matters located *elsewhere*, that they are aware of and aspire to; as well as with places, objects and animated entities that are *nowhere*: neither present nor actual in material terms, but conceivable thanks to the work of the imagination. The *not yet there*, the *elsewhere* and the *nowhere* comprise a typology of engagement with absence in which different modalities illustrate the complexity of children's imaginative thinking. Young children are capable, through the use of the imagination, of mobilising spaces, times, people and events that are not immediately present. They imagine the impossible and invent the non-existent cognitively as well as emotionally and socially.

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Children use this complex symbolic power for multiple purposes of representation, including representation of self, others and the objective environment. Because the imagination works through freeing self from what is present, they also use it to represent what is lacking in their everyday surroundings, yet needed in material, symbolic and emotional terms. This process was evident in the drawings of institutionalized Romanian children, who lost or never had families. In an environment devoid of luxuries, children depicted their world through happy and colourful scenes charged with meanings that 'transport' the viewer (and the child herself) to both past and future; the different times they long for coalesce into scenes of a future that is informed by a joyful past spent with their families (see Image 1). Depictions that engage with the *not yet there* are impinged by desire: the immediacy of the 'present' is disregarded, favouring instead potential, anticipated and intensely wanted experiences. These drawings reflect dissatisfaction with the immediate environment and expectations of a different reality, mediated by an emotionally charged anticipation that 'feels' real. The

space of culture these drawings tap into is child-centred, usually occupied by mothers and other close caregivers in the immediate family.



Image 1. Drawing of the social world (Romanian child, 1st grade, living in a care centre)

Children's ability to 'free' themselves from their immediate environment is also found in the process of representing and conveying worlds that are located *elsewhere*. Children draw worlds containing multiple elements which they are not necessarily in contact with in their daily experiences, but whose existence they are aware of. For instance, when prompted to portray their world, this capacity enables children to imagine and convey much more than what they have experienced in their daily lives, as in the case of the child in Lebanon who produced the drawing below (see Image 2). This depiction represents the cosmos peppered by an array of planets and other stellar elements, accompanied by green, possibly non-human anthropoid beings. Children's representations of their social world in terms of realities found in places different from their own are thus heterotopic: containing elements of other realities, known through secondary contact. In the process of producing drawings that contain *elsewhere* elements, children engage with spaces of culture in the world 'out there', including institutions and many spaces which are children-independent and from which they are culturally and socially separated such as civic institutions and government.



Image 2: Drawing the social world (Lebanese child, 4th grade, private school)

Engagement with the fantastic, the non-existent and fictional is another way children relate to the interplay between absence and presence. In these instances, children use their imagination and engage in playful exploration of what is possible but not necessarily existent, the realm of the *nowhere*. Children's engagement here is with beings "whose existence is invoked only in special contexts such as fiction or make-believe, and may even be explicitly denied" (Harris, 2012, p. 137). Thus, for example, children in Mexico brought to representations of their community folk narratives of fairy tales and other cultural materials drawing fantastic elements such as dragons (see Image 3). Graphic depictions engaging with the *nowhere* underscore children's differentiation and communication of utopian perspectives: elements represented in this type of products belong to no-place (utopia) territory. In these instances, imagined objects and entities are literally *nowhere* in the material world, yet children are capable of conceiving them and, further, integrate them to the immediacy of what they know, such as symbols of nationhood (flag) as in the example below.



Image 3. Drawing the social world (Mexican child, 1st grade, rural setting)

This typology of relationships with absence is far from exhaustive. Indeed, when children are asked to narrate their pictorial representations, the oral accounts they provide are fluid and by no means restricted to what is present in the drawing itself, generating stories of multiple textures and hues that capitalize on what they represented both through presence and absence. It is usual for carers, for example, to ask about a graphic element that the child designates as a house, just to be told immediately after about the family that lives there and the activities they ‘are’ undertaking at present, but that the observer cannot see. The potential of drawings is thus that of continuous meta-symbolic activity where initial symbolic representations become platforms for further symbolic representation in endless loops of imagination. Children’s pictorial accounts ‘draw’ on culture for representing what is present, what is known but absent and what is yet to exist; their very representations, in turn, become affordances that enable children’s further production of culture in which they narrate, interpret and re-present their own drawings as external products.

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Entering Culture: Care, Play and Story-Telling

The typology of engagement with absence discussed above grounds the overall conceptual model of the imagination that we propose in this chapter. In what follows, our aim is to show that the cultural and socio-psychological practices scaffolding the development of the child allow not only a general cognitive engagement with the absent but a diversified and complex exploration of absent fields which are cognitive,

emotional and social. The three modalities of engagement with the absent we presented – *the not yet there*, *the elsewhere* and *the nowhere* – are now explored in care, play and story-telling, themselves practices of culture that contain exemplary and always situated self-other relations. Table 1 presents the overall conceptual model. It is important to note the *not yet there*, the *elsewhere* and the *nowhere* do not correspond perfectly to any of these practices but are represented in a dynamic interactive circle that indicates the movement between them. As the imagination grows and expands, these relations with the absent mix and interact freely in self-other relations and in practices of culture. This psychosocial dynamic is what the dual arrows seek to capture.

In developing this model, we purposively take the discussion towards the emotional and social drivers of the imagination to demonstrate that the understanding of its cognitive properties cannot be separated from the understanding of its social and affective production. The cognitive, the emotional and the social are intertwined in development and must be integrated in the sociocultural psychology of the imagination. Central to our contribution here therefore is to offer an account that builds on the underlying architecture of the dialogical mind – the interdependence between self and other – integrating socio-cognitive processes and the emotional dynamic of self-other relations.

Self – Other relations	Practices of Culture	Relation with the absent
Carer – child	Care	
Child – child	Play	
Culture – child	Story-telling	

Table 1: Imagination in children entering culture

Care

Do infants imagine? If we were to judge imagination based on its achievements in science, art, and its expression in the mundane activities of adults we would probably be inclined to reject this possibility. Indeed, following our own definition of the imagination, one might wonder if very young children,

traditionally seen as living strictly in a world of what is present in sensation and movement (Piaget, 1950), can even understand absence. However, drawing on scholarship in the area of psychoanalysis, attachment, and intersubjectivity, we argue that it is precisely the interplay between presence and absence that marks the developmental roots of imagination. This interplay becomes manifest from the onset of human ontogeny in the relation between child and caregiver. Imagination, we hypothesise, finds its origin in relations of care in which the child experiences, for the first time, the *trust* necessary to engage and cope with the many absences of the world.

One of the first significant absences experienced by the child is, in fact, that of the caregiver. And it is this first lack that the imagination, in its incipient form, comes to address. In doing so, it has a crucial developmental value for “the infant’s journey from absolute dependence, through relative dependence, to independence” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 588). The road from living in a ‘me’ world, in which child and caregiver are one, to a world of others, of ‘not-me’, requires precisely separation and absence (the reality principle in Freudian terms). At the same time, for this separation to be bridged through the imaginative use of culture, the quality of maternal care, meeting the specific, developing needs of the child, is essential (what Winnicott famously referred to as ‘the good-enough mother’). The incipient use of imagination in relations of care is fundamental for facilitating the separation between child and caregiver and, as such, for Winnicott, it is also a key indicator of psychological health (Winnicott, 1960, p. 586).

Winnicott is not alone in describing the healthy development of the child as a progressive moment from indistinguishable union with the caregiver to attaining “unit status” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 589). Freud (1911) discussed this movement in terms of the struggle between the pleasure and the reality principle, while Piaget (1950, 1951) saw it as the progression of intelligence from egocentric to allocentric thinking through decentration. Practices of care facilitate this transition by gradually introducing the child to absence and thus, offering her a “continuity of being” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 594). Caregiving is meant to ‘bring the child into existence’ psychologically by not creating a violent rupture between union and separation. The dynamics inscribed in good-enough mothering or, more generally, caregiving, is for Winnicott that of the interplay between holding and handling, between ‘living together’ and ‘living with’, between using empathy for providing everything the infant needs before any frustration emerges and the gradual and loving introduction

of boundaries and absences (Winnicott, 1960, p. 588). The transition from holding to handling can be painful both for the child and the caregiver because it involves giving up the illusion of union in the mother and the feeling of omnipotence in the child. Indeed, what both Winnicott and Freud refer to as an illusion or fantasy – that of complete union – needs to be broken precisely for imagination to emerge and, with it, the possibility of togetherness between two distinct and separate individuals.

What does this imagination involve? It invites an engagement with the *not yet there* scaffolded by the trust that the care-giver will return, the trust that keeps self and other, at the same time, together and apart, absent and yet present for one another. This emotional trust goes hand in hand with the onset of the capacity to symbolise, first expressed in transitional objects and transitional phenomena (Winnicott, 1953; 1971). The first not-me possessions of the child, expressing her attachment to a teddy or a blanket, “not part of the infant’s body yet [...] not fully recognised as belonging to external reality” (Winnicott, 1953, p. 89) are effectively the first instantiations, in our ontogenetic trajectory, of bringing the absent (the not here) into the present (the here and now) for the purpose of adapting the child to this present and the immediate future (the *not yet here*). Caregivers easily observe the intense emotional value of these first objects for the child and in agreeing to share the view of the object as special they support the imagination of the child and establish an emotional contract that roots in the child “the first experiences of agency and power over what is real” (Jovchelovitch, 2015, p. 85).

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Indeed, just like the first manifestation of the imagination in children would be impossible outside of the caregiver’s gradual ‘disillusion of the infant’ (Winnicott, 1953, p. 94), it would also never accomplish its function without the caregiver actively scaffolding the child’s early use of symbols. Importantly, for Winnicott transitional objects are to be distinguished both from external objects (in the physical world) and internal objects (their internal representation): these objects ‘stand-in’ for something that is imagined as partly the child, partly the significant other and partly the world. Their realm is precisely that of the imagination, “the realm of illusion which is at the basis of initiation of experience” (Winnicott, 1953, p. 96; see also Fordham, 1977). This potential or third space postulated is the one that both inner reality and external life contribute to, without it being reduced to either. It is a space “between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived, between me-extensions and the not-me” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 100), in other

words, between the here and the not (yet) here. The continuity between transitional phenomena, play, games and cultural experiences is well established (Winnicott, 1971, p. 51). As practices of care welcome children into the world of culture, it is culture itself that grows out of the potential space since early imaginative play with transitional objects is “retained in the intense experiencing that belong to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 14; see also Glăveanu, 2009).

What underpins the developmental value of care practices and their early forms of imaginative engagement with the world is *trust* between child and caregiver. Trust and the feeling of safety nurture early forms of imagination within care-based relations making the child confident that she will not be abandoned by a parent who is *not yet here*. This is what theories of attachment refer to as the secure base (Bowlby, 1988, p. 11), which empowers children and young people to venture out, explore and dare to take the challenge of the outside world. Classical research on attachment shows that the quality of carer-child intersubjective relations shapes children’s capacity to create the border between the ‘me’ and the ‘not-me’ and venture out into the not-me. In a series of well-known observations and experiments, Bowlby (1973) and Ainsworth (see Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), explored the behaviour of children who are separated from their caregiver and placed in an unfamiliar environment together with strangers. Cyclical phases of protest, despair, detachment and, finally, (re)attachment are observed in these cases, often explained by the two authors in terms of separation anxiety, “namely anxiety about losing, or becoming separated from, someone loved” (Bowlby, 1973: 29). Such behaviours and episodes can be conceptualised from the point of view of an incipient imagination in the child and the way it helps her deal with absence and separation.

More recently, Harris (2012: 217) and colleagues have provided evidence of the “predictive power of early attachment classifications” for how children engage with their caregivers to make sense of the world over time. Using Ainsworth’s “strange situation” as described above, Harris and colleagues (2012, p. 82) classified 15-month-old children as secure (coped aptly with mother’s absence and displayed positive reactions upon her return), ambivalent (coped less well with mother’s absence and displayed more difficulty to be comforted when she returned) or avoidant (displayed indifference towards their mother’s absence and tended to disregard her on her return) in their attachment. In a series of experiments performed when these children were age 4 and 5, they found that children’s trust on information and assessment of what is real is

contingent on different forms of attachment. Securely attached children displayed a more independent, adaptable and resourceful engagement with their world, being able to draw their own conclusions from the information provided by their mother and the stranger. In this way, “caregivers offer much more than a secure base for autonomous exploration” (Harris, 2012, p. 88): in their self-directed understanding of unfamiliar situations, children draw not only on their carer’s knowledge but also on their own empirical explorations of the world and the knowledge offered by unfamiliar others (Harris, 2012).

Trevarthen (2006) criticised attachment theory and its tendency to reduce child-caregiver relations to the notion of a secure base. Both Winnicott and Bowlby presented, to some extent, a depiction of children as dependent on the caregiver’s actions, at least initially. In the experimental situations mentioned above, children are more or less passive recipients of a context that is constructed for and not with them. And yet, a closer observation of everyday practices points us to the fact that children are, from the start, active participants in their relation to caregivers. These lead us to an understanding of care as fundamentally *bi-directional*: caregiver and child are both attuned to each other and motivated to build intersubjective bonds. This, as Trevarthen puts, is grounded in human sociability and adapted to support the imagination, which moves from the child-caretaker dyad to the level of the community and back;

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Human *sociability* innately seeks to build meaning by sharing the narratives implicit in adventurous activity, and by playing with ways of acting and experiencing. It is adapted to support exploration of life in a community that eventually extends over many generations, not just in parent–child dyads. The process of discovery in development of the imagination is best motivated in symmetric, or at least mutually valued, relationships where initiatives are exchanged between different identified persons and where stories with conventional meanings can be built (Trevarthen, 2006, p. 63).

In this sense, the development of imagination in children entering culture can never be properly understood unless we address the issue of culture itself. Care practices are, ultimately, cultural practices, and they are both informed by cultural conventions and constantly reconstructed within each child - caregiver dyad. The

‘intimacy of shared meaning’ Trevarthen (2006, p. 65; see also Trevarthen, 2010) fuels the first acts of imagination whereby absence and presence are invested with meaning within the relationship. In practices of care, the absence of the caregiver prompts children’s imaginative engagement with the world and the *not yet there*. Anticipation and trust are key manifestations of imagination in child-caregiver relations, supported by the early forms of symbolism of the potential space. Gradually, a more complex use of signs and symbols expands the child’s possibilities of engaging with absence in the form of the *elsewhere* and *nowhere*, something we can easily observe in children’s play both within and beyond the context of care.

Play

“Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play” wrote Winnicott (1971, p. 100). Just as care practices introduce the child to the world of symbols and culture, play consolidates the power of the self to use culture in an active and creative manner. Through play, children enrich their immediate experience of the world by investing its objects and people with new qualities, making them ‘stand for’ something else, something that is absent from their current situation. Play is thus the prototypical way in which children’s imagination is both expressed and cultivated within social interaction and social representation. In play, children’s engagement with absence diversifies and comes to its full potential; play brings forth a future that is *not yet there* (e.g., playing parents or being a doctor), access to spaces and times from *elsewhere*, outside of children’s immediate universe (e.g., the jungle, the round table of medieval knights), and even relate to the *nowhere* or the impossible (e.g., in the form of unicorns, talking animals, and superheroes). The *not yet here*, the *elsewhere* and the *nowhere* all combine in fantasy play in ways that essentially expand the child’s possibilities of acting in the here and now (see also Schempp Matthews, 1977). Pretence, ‘as-if’ thinking and experimentation, defining features of children’s play, are made possible by an active imagination that uses what is possible and fictional to *transform* what is actual and real.

In this section, we will review key contributions to play coming from different theoretical traditions, with a particular focus on the genetic epistemology of Piaget and the socio-cultural and historical approach of Vygotsky. This exploration will reveal the ways in which complementary frameworks can illuminate the relation between play as a cultural and developmental practice and the work of imagination. While there is

extensive support for the assumption that imagination peaks during preschool years, particularly in children's symbolic or pretence play, it is important to start by asking whether play is indeed imaginative before the acquisition of language. Gardner (1982), for example, examining if toddler's early expressions of play express 'genuine creative imaginations', concluded that while young children in diapers are charming their play behaviours are simple and down to earth, repetitive and stereotypical. These are, according to him, "selective imitation, not productive imagination" (Gardner, 1982, p. 170).

However, any sharp distinction between imitating what 'is' and imagining what 'is not' is contestable and highly problematic for our understanding of children as cultural beings. As we will come to show in this section, using or reproducing cultural elements in play does not make children less but precisely more imaginative. This is because, similar to the case of care, culture offers children the means to make present what is absent within their immediate environment and interactions. Whenever there is imitation and re-use of culture there is also space for imagination and for discovering more than what is given even within highly familiar contexts and highly scripted actions. Cultural traditions are in fact required for creative imaginations because they operate as platforms from where the new can emerge (Glăveanu, 2014). Repetition in this case is the eye of the beholder: from the perspective of the child imitation is always reconstructive. We will return to these ideas later on; for now, let us trace their roots back to the foundational scholarship of Piaget and his extensive analysis of play, dreams and imitation in childhood.

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Piaget (1951) discussed play in the context of his broader theory of intelligence, postulating the need for equilibrium between reality and the ego and the adaptation that results from coordinating assimilation and accommodation processes. Broadly speaking, in assimilation the person incorporates elements of the outside world without however changing his or her internal structures; accommodation, on the other hand, involves precisely the transformation of mental structures as a result of assimilation. Intelligence, a key form of adaptation, involves therefore both these mechanisms and this assumption led Piaget to describe the child's cognitive development in terms of the (im)balance between assimilation and accommodation. How does play contribute to this process? Piaget thought that, within human development, play illustrates the clear predominance of assimilation over accommodation. And this general feature applies to all three types of play he considered in the first seven years of life: practice play (grounded in repeated movement), symbolic play

(characterised by the use of language and symbols), and play with rules (best illustrated by games). By illustrating in each case a situation of disequilibrium, play is thus studied by Piaget as a type of activity that is eventually overcome or at least supplemented by other types of activities meant to advance logical thought.

Why do play activities favour assimilation over accommodation? Because assimilation is considered by Piaget to subordinate things to the child's own activity while accommodation does the opposite, adjusting movements and perception to the objects. In this sense, a playing child shows little interest for things themselves and focuses more on the pleasure of manipulating them in accordance with her wishes. The 'functional pleasure' that comes with practice play, for example, overshadows any other roles this activity might have for young children. A toddler repeating her behaviour in play is, for Piaget, doing it for the mere joy of mastering the world and showing her power in relation to it; this does not show an effort to learn or investigate, typical of accommodation. Both Winnicott and Trevarthen, as discussed above, would disagree with this assessment. By reducing play to assimilation, Piaget not only focuses on one of its dimensions (acting on the world) at the expense of others (being acted upon by the world), but also pays attention almost exclusively to what is visible (present), disregarding what is not visible (absent) in the play situation. Even in his analysis of symbolic or make-believe play, Piaget stressed the importance of 'egocentric thought', thought that focuses only on the perspective of the child. In this way, he disconnected the playing child from other people and from culture itself (see Nicolopoulou, 1993). Subsequent research such as the programme led by Paul Harris (2000), kept the focus on cognitive processes while acknowledging the deeply social element of children playing together with adults and peers. Harris shows that dialogue and language shape the imagination and that the construction of make-believe worlds is co-construction and shared experience from the start. However, a full appreciation of the emotional dynamic of self-other relations is absent from his account.

A deeper consideration of play as a cultural practice is markedly present in the work of Vygotsky and his collaborators. Vygotsky's position contrasts sharply with that of Piaget. In advocating for a broader definition of children's imagination and creativity, Vygotsky notes that:

If we understand creativity in this way, it is easy to see that the creative processes are already fully manifest in earliest childhood. (...) We can identify creative processes in children at the very earliest ages, especially in their play. A child who sits astride a stick and pretends to be riding a horse; a little girl who plays with a doll and imagines she is its mother; a boy who in his games becomes a pirate, a soldier, or a sailor, all these children at play represent examples of the most authentic, truest creativity. Everyone knows what an enormous role imitation plays in children's play. A child's play very often is just an echo of what he saw and heard adults do; nevertheless, these elements of his previous experience are never merely reproduced in play in exactly the way they occurred in reality. A child's play is not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired. He combines them and uses them to construct a new reality, one that conforms to his own needs and desires (Vygotsky, 2004, pp. 11-12).

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Not only does Vygotsky recognise here the creative nature of children's play, but he also recovers the important role of imitation for producing novelty. In his seminal text on play, Vygotsky (1966) considered it in relation to children's needs and desires and the way they change over time. Play, particularly symbolic play, is a form of wish-fulfilment for Vygotsky, something that resonates with our discussion of imagination in care practices. By using their imagination, children can *mobilise* what is absent from their here and now as well as *invest* what is present with new qualities and functions. They do this by creating in play what Vygotsky calls an 'imaginary situation'. This imaginary situation is based for him on the separation between the fields of vision and meaning during preschool years. Children's capacity to re-signify their immediate reality, scaffolded by social interactions and nurtured by cultural means, allows children to free themselves, gradually, from what is given within a situation and expand their understanding of the possible and the impossible. Our own approach to imagination understands this dynamics as an interplay between the there, not yet there, elsewhere and nowhere in children's play. Anticipating the future and bringing into the situation elements that belong to other places and contexts is what the work of the imagination does, a work

that reconnects, in a flexible manner, the fields of vision and meaning (or, rather, transforms the field of vision through the use of meaning).

For Vygotsky, a second important characteristic of play is that it is rule-based, even when these rules are not formalised in advance (as in the case of games). This again contrasts with Piaget's understanding of play with rules as a distinct category. Rules stem from the imaginary situation itself, something that renders complete freedom in children's play illusory. Yet, within rules, children act in play more or less independently from their immediate surroundings (i.e., what is present). This is because, in play, a child can act differently in relation to what she sees or finds in the situation, thus developing an imaginary relation to what is not there. In doing so, play creates a zone of proximal development for the child, allowing her to be above her average age or behaviour or, metaphorically, a head taller than herself.

Important for Vygotsky, however, was the fact that in play objects are 'pivots' or props for the child's imagination. Wooden sticks become horses because the child can separate the meaning of a horse from the animal itself and associate it to the stick in her hands. Through this, the elsewhere is brought into the here and now. But, for this to happen, young children still need the support of objects – in this case, the presence of a stick that can be ridden like a horse within the imaginary situation. Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky discussed play not in terms of assimilation and accommodation but in terms of the relation between ideas (meaning) and things. If, initially in our ontogeny, things impose themselves over meanings, play is able, in time, to reverse this situation without completely losing sight of things (and, thus, not reaching the level of 'full symbolism'). His analysis is close to our understanding of imagination as relating what is present (things) and what is absent (meanings). In this sense, absence does not refer to a lack of meaning but the ability of ideas to refer to things that are not immediately present in the situation. What is particular about imagination as opposed to abstract thinking is the fact that imagination, especially in children, is still *bound* to its material support. The absences made present by the child who imagines respond to her needs and desires as much as they do to the child's immediate surroundings. For this reason, Vygotsky notes:

A child, despite all his enthusiasm, is perfectly able to keep apart in his mind the world he invents during his play from the real one, and naturally he looks for support for the

imagined objects and relationships in the palpable real objects of real life. It is precisely this support he seeks which differentiates the child's play from fantasizing. As the child grows up it gives up play. He replaces play with imagination. When a child who is growing up gives up playing, what he is doing, strictly speaking, is giving up nothing more than the search for this support in real objects. In place of play, he now gives himself over to fantasy. He builds castles in the air and creates what is called daydreams (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 275).

This passage reflects Vygotsky's general claim that, in the course of development, elements of culture are internalised by the child through social interaction with adults and peers. In this way, the emergence and development of psychological processes, including imagination, is subjected to the same dynamic: imagination is the *internalisation of children's play* (Smolucha & Smolucha, 1986) or, in other words, imagination in adolescents and adults is *play without action* (Vygotsky, 1966). We would add to this that the imagination is the internalisation of care and play. While this general understanding marks a significant progress from Piaget's individualised notion of play and acknowledges it as a cultural practice that constitutes self, it also risks depicting play as a transitional phase in our lives. In contrast, Göncü and Perone (2005) argue that pretend play is a life-span activity not confined to childhood years as exemplified, for instance, by adults' Improv games, consisting of improvisational performance, and believed to stimulate creativity and learning. While there are undeniable differences in play activities between childhood and adulthood, the same dynamic can be observed – using existing props to elicit what is absent within the situation in ways that transform the here and now. Just like adults, children understand from an early age what is real and what is fictional within a play situation (Harris, Brown, Marriott, Whittall & Harmer, 1991) and can operate within different fictional worlds (Skolnick & Bloom, 2006). The child does not think that a stick is a horse; she uses the stick as a prop to imagine the horse. But, while it is important to notice the numerous continuities between children and adults at play, it is equally significant to understand childhood play in its *own right* and in its *own terms*, as a key vehicle for the child's imagination (Nicolopoulou, 1993). Both Piaget and Vygotsky considered it in relation to what is to come in children's lives, particularly the development of abstract thinking (logical thinking and thinking in concepts, respectively); this focus on

mental capacities overlooks the relation between play and other cultural practices enabled by the imagination, chief among them the practice of storytelling, to which we turn next.

Storytelling

We are both story tellers and story listeners and this uniquely human quality is cultivated from early on across cultures (Barthes, 1993; Bruner, 2004; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Even before children are born, they are part of the stories their parents tell; soon after, before they have the ability to understand them fully, children hear stories about people, animals, and things around them; as soon as they speak, they produce similar stories in their play; and, as they grow up, they create stories about themselves, about who they are, about their past and, most of all, about their future. In each of these cases, stories are objectified imaginations that open up the space of the possible in thinking and allow the child to talk about people and events she has not, and sometimes will never experience. ‘Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom’ is a typical opening for children’s stories, an invitation to engage with the *not there* in the form of the *elsewhere* and the *nowhere*, the mythical space of fantasy. Autobiographical narratives occupy a different register, inviting the child and adolescent to consider how things were, to give them new meaning and envision alternatives – the what if (see also Hviid & Villadsen, this volume) – always in light of how things might be – the *not yet here*. In the words of Andrews (2014, p. 3), “it is imagination that lifts narrative to another dimension and offers it both the possibility of history and of a tomorrow”. In all the cases above, stories are fuelled by the imagination and imagination, in turn, is fuelled by culture, by all our encounters with other people, other places, and other ways of thinking. This makes storytelling, *at once*, a deeply personal and deeply cultural practice with great developmental value for both mind and culture.

Jerome Bruner (2008) is one of the pioneers of the narrative orientation in psychology, an approach that focuses on how we make meaning about ourselves and the world around us through the stories we tell and the tools culture puts at our disposal to do so. Indeed, narrative is “serious business” (p. 45) from a cultural point of view since it is through narratives that norms, values, and conventions are passed on from one generation to the next. This makes any exploration of children’s storytelling all the more important. And this exploration is necessarily multifaceted. Nicolopoulou (1997), reviewing the field, referred, for instance, to narratives written *for* children, told *to* children, constructed by adults *with* children, and composed and told

by children. For her, children's narrative activity is "a form of symbolic activity linking the construction of reality with the formation of identity" (Nicolopoulou, 1997, p. 180). This socio-cultural approach resonates widely with the work of Vygotsky (2004) on the topic of literary creativity in children. Both pretend play and storytelling were, for him, characterised by rule-governed creative imagination. In his own words:

Children's creative writing has the same relationship to the writing of adults as children's play has to life. Play is necessary to the child himself, just as children's creative writing is necessary, first and foremost, for the proper development of the powers of the young author himself. It is also necessary for the child's milieu in which it was born and to which it is addressed (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 65).

Moreover, referring to the child's creative activity as syncretic, Vygotsky found it difficult to differentiate between storytelling and other play activities such as drawing and role-play: "This syncretism points to the common root that unites all the different branches of children's art" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 67). And, we can add, this root is precisely the imagination that permeates children's relations to themselves and the world around them. It is also the power of imagination, expressed in narrative, that turns children from passive recipients of culture into *agentic actors* in their own right (see also Daiute, this volume). Brockmeier (2009) proposed previously that the narrative imagination is both a form and practice of human agency. Telling stories not only transmits but creates new meanings, expanding the symbolic space of what is possible in thought, language, and action. Following Brockmeier,

narrative is a form of agentic discourse that allows for the most flexible positioning of agents and actions in a story, as well as of the narrators of that story. What makes narrative such a flexible form and vehicle of imagination is its capacity to tap into multiple frameworks of meaning that draw on both real and fictive scenarios of agency. Narrative imagination seamlessly mingles the factual with the fictitious, the real with the possible; in fact, it fuses the real and possible with the impossible (Brockmeier, 2009, p. 227).

The here and the *elsewhere*, the not here and the *not yet here*, the everywhere and the *nowhere* intermingle in narrative, freeing the storyteller from commitments to the real and the factual. Despite clear conventions in constructing narratives – conventions children are introduced to from early on – narrative imagination opens up a new world of possibility for both those who listen and tell stories. And this applies independent of the content of the story, even in the case of stories about the self, which often strive to give a coherent and realistic account of one's life.

Imagination plays a special role in what Zittoun and de Saint Laurent (2015) called *life-creativity*. This process of imagining one's life both reconstructs and constructs life-paths in a constant back and forth temporal movement facilitated by an imagination that allows the person to explore not only what is but what is not, could be, or will never be. In their analysis of a documentary series called *Romans d'ados* (Teen novels), following the development of seven teenagers in Switzerland, the two authors discussed the narratives of one teenager about her life as an example of creative imagination. Her efforts to make sense of different changes, to re-signify past events while at the same time looking towards a possible future illustrate the power of imagination to build the self. Moreover, they also illustrate the value of storytelling as a cultural practice for both maintaining and transforming culture's norms and conventions in the creation of a life trajectory. And this complex process is at once personal and shared, marked by acts of appropriating cultural elements, such as the stories of others, and turning them into symbolic resources for the self. Zittoun argues, in this context, for the imaginative use of books, films and songs, for understanding and addressing problematic real-life situations (see Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). This kind of use is not limited to the fully acculturated person. On the contrary, its origins can be traced, as discussed before, in the first uses of transitional objects within relations of care or the use of things as props within symbolic play. Language and narrative transform such practices and, to a greater extent than before, 'free' the self from her immediate context. In doing so, they also change self *and* context, testifying to the complex relation between the imagined and the real.

In summary, storytelling is yet another cultural practice through which children enter culture that is unconceivable outside of imagination. From a very young age, children imagine, pretend, and dream (Woolley, 1995). Nurtured within relations of care, children's confidence in the world and the ability to act

on it, physically and imaginatively, finds its first forms of expression in play. In turn, play is not a solipsistic activity nor is it the egocentric expression. On the contrary, children play with others, both real and imagined and, in the process of doing so, construct stories about their play, about others, and about themselves.

Conclusions: Imagination and the transformation of culture

In this chapter we explored the work of the imagination in practices whereby children enter culture. Central to our argument was to link the imaginative capacities of the developing mind to the sociocultural dynamic of self-other relations. We aimed to show that there is a relation between internalization and the production of culture and between imagination and symbolic thought, which can only be understood in relation to the interdependence between self and other. To this end we focused on care, play and story-telling discussing each as an instantiation of the relational practices that both immerse children in culture and build the imagination in the cognitive, emotional and social development of the child.

We argued for a positive view of the imagination that sees it as the human capacity to go beyond the immediate situation and play with the reality of the world. We proposed to see it as a relationship to absence that is not separate from reality but draws from reality and feeds back into reality. It permeates symbolic thinking and the very nature of the human transcendental social constituting a foundational property of the dialogical mind. This conceptualisation enabled us to re-examine our research on children's representations of the public sphere to propose a typology of engagement with absence: the *not yet there*, impinged by anticipation and desire; the *nowhere*, pertaining to the fictional and the fantastic; and the *elsewhere*, characterised by absent elements the child is aware of through direct or indirect experience. As children are immersed in culture through care, play and story-telling, their capacity to relate to the absent grows and diversifies. In these cultural practices the absent becomes present in a symbolic and, thus, very *real* for the child. Just as Vygotsky (2004) argued, imagination is not simply a flight of fancy, nor is it deceiving our sense of reality. On the contrary, imagination adapts the self to the world and, ultimately, changes the world for the self. Thus, the capacity to imagine is both one of the highest achievements of the mind as it enters culture and a key engine of its development within culture.

The socio-cultural psychology of the imagination shows that imagining is an outcome of mind in context rather than a diversion in the development of reasoning and thought. It permeates the analytical orientation and is required for the development of an objective world. The imagination enables comparison, exploration of alleged and alternative views, the invention of possible scenarios and the creativity of symbolic operations. However, these cognitive operations evolve scaffolded by the emotional dynamics of self-other relations and the social conditions in which children grow up. The developmental history of the imagination showcases a key principle of socio-cultural research in psychology: cognition, emotion and sociality are intrinsic and inseparable dimensions of the dialogical mind and together they make mind. One cannot be seen at the expense of the other and integrating these dimensions is an important task in the development of a less fragmented psychological science.

We conclude with a final word on the adaptive function of the imagination. ‘I have a dream’, ‘let us pretend’, ‘once upon a time’ are sentences that hold power because they remind us of what an imagining mind can do towards the possible, that is, towards the search for alternative worlds which free us from the challenges of present and immediate situations. They protect from hardship, failure and distress while enabling the experience of hope, the expanded and productive renewal of the ways we know, feel and relate to the world. The imagination is a resource that children and then adults garner *in culture* and that, simultaneously, enables all and each one of us to navigate and (re)construct culture. It opens us to the possible and connects us to the absent; it is therefore the substance and the requirement for the realization of human freedom.

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